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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE TURNS OUT THE LIGHTS

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¶1. Summary: The dome of Saint Peter's Basilica plunged into darkness March 28 signaling Vatican City's participation in Earth Hour 2009. Environmental issues have moved more to the front burner since Pope Benedict XVI assumed office in 2005 and the Vatican has initiated several highly publicized "green" projects since then. While protecting the environment has always been a feature of Catholic social teaching, the Holy See is increasingly focused on urging its partners to ensure that the world remains safe and livable. End Summary.

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Human Beings at the Top of the Environmental Chain  
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¶2. In recent years, and increasingly since the election of Pope Benedict XVI, the Holy See has taken a strong stance in favor of environmental protection. Its approach to environmental problems is focused on moral imperatives, not mainstream political and social activism. Unsurprisingly, the Church approaches environmental concerns from a human-centered and theologically-driven perspective. The Church believes that the protection of human rights (which encompasses the protection of vulnerable populations and future generations) goes hand-in-hand with responsible environmental stewardship. The Holy See therefore participates in efforts which actively promote both the environment and human beings.

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Green Initiatives at the Holy See  
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¶3. Recent Holy See green initiatives have drawn media and scientific attention. For example, Vatican City -- the world's smallest sovereign state -- is also the world's first carbon-neutral state. It offsets its emissions through a combined use of renewable energy and involvement in a reforestation project in Hungary. The forest not only provides environmental benefits, but also assists in the recovery of an environmentally degraded tract of land. Better yet, it provides local jobs. According to one official at the Pontifical Council for Culture, "One can emit less CO2 by not using heating and not driving a car, or one can do penance by intervening to offset emissions, in this case by planting trees. It is an ethical and a cultural imperative."

¶4. The Vatican has also installed some 5000 square meters of solar panels on the roof of its 8000-seat audience hall. These

panels provide clean energy to light, heat and air-condition the building -- and excess energy is channeled into Vatican City's electricity grid. The solar panels reduce the 108-acre city-state's annual carbon dioxide emissions by about 225,000 kilograms. They also save the equivalent of 80,000 kilograms of oil on an annual basis. The Vatican also plans to install solar panels atop of the city state's employee dining facilities. In part through use of all these panels, the Vatican plans to be 20% self sufficient for its energy needs by 2020.

15. In addition, the Vatican plans to set up a solar energy system project on a tract of its extra-territorial property north of Rome. The project, which will be installed on land currently used as a transmission center for Vatican Radio, will generate over six times the energy needed for the station. Again, the Vatican will transfer the excess energy back to the Italian national grid for power for surrounding communities.

16. Even simple re-cycling of trash and garden waste has taken off in a big way in Vatican City, with a greater differentiation of materials than in the surrounding state of Italy. And Vatican City is also reducing its energy consumption. In 1999, in preparation for millennium celebrations, the entire lighting system of St. Peter's Basilica was upgraded to be low-impact. Strategically placed energy-saving light bulbs were installed inside and out, cutting the basilica's energy consumption by an estimated 40 percent. The March 28 "switch-off" to mark Earth Hour was another gesture to emphasize the moral imperative of reducing humanity's negative imprint on the environment.

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#### Religious Orders Follow the Vatican's Lead

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17. Beyond Rome, religious orders are at the forefront of the Catholic Church's environmental initiatives. Respect and

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protection for the environment is incorporated into most religious order mission statements. In many countries, particularly in the West, religious orders have formed cooperative ventures for education, lobbying, and practical projects.

18. For example, in Australia, Presentation sisters provide education in sustainability and work a piece of land according to permaculture principles; they also operate peace, ecology and justice centers. Members of the Maryknoll order work with indigenous people in Mexico to encourage reforestation and crop diversification throughout the Mixteca Alta region. This group has established tree nurseries in 22 farming communities and has planted more than 150,000 trees. Maryknoll sisters run the Center for the Integrity of Creation in Baguio, the Philippines, which is threatened by excessive logging. The Center focuses on education for biodiversity and sustainable development. And a Dominican sister, based at the Dominican hospital in Santa Cruz, California, works full time on issues related to the impact of health services on the environment. She says, "Our ecological commitment is integral to our healing mission. There is a profound connection that exists between healing the individual and healing the planet." The Dominicans also run an ecological farm in Benin City, Nigeria.

19. Back in Rome, the international headquarters of men's and women's religious orders also have a joint Commission for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. Membership includes superiors general of orders, a representative of the Holy See and nuns and brothers resident in Rome. The Commission aims at providing information to members of the religious institutes on issues of justice, peace and the integrity of creation to enable the institutes' informed engagement for social change.

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¶10. Meanwhile, the Holy See also pursues environmental initiatives internationally. It has been an active participant in international fora on the issue - beginning in Stockholm in 1972 at the UN Conference on the Human Environment. The Holy See has Observer status at the United Nations Environment Program, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the Food and Agricultural Organization, the World Food Program, the UN Center for Human Settlements, and the UN Commission for Sustainable Development. The Vatican will participate in the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December as an observer. It also has observer status at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The Holy See's message at these events will continue to be that humanity and the environment are interdependent and so actions to address problems must consider both. As Nuncio Migliore said to the UN General Assembly in February 2008, "Every small initiative to reduce or offset one's carbon footprint, be it the avoidance of the unnecessary use of transport or the daily effort to reduce energy consumption, contributes to mitigating environmental decay and concretely shows commitment to environmental care."

¶11. The Holy See also issues official statements to draw attention to environmental matters, sometimes in conjunction with others. In 2002, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches issued the "Venice Declaration" calling on their followers to be environmentally responsible. Similar ecumenical declarations followed and in 2006, Pope Benedict and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew declared that, "Respect for creation stems from respect for human life and dignity... Christians and all other believers have a specific role to play in proclaiming moral values and in educating people in ecological awareness, which is none other than responsibility towards self, towards others, towards creation."

¶12. Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2006 and 2007 Peace Day messages, emphasized the symbiosis between the environment and human life.

In 2008, moreover, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace issued an environmental "Ten Commandments" based on elements of the Church's Social Doctrine. These commandments emphasized the centrality of the human person, respect for the created environment, the link between ecology and economic development, responsibility towards future generations, and that modification of the ecosystem is licit when respecting the natural order. The complete text of the ecological Ten Commandments is available on Embassy Vatican's Diplopedia page:  
[http://diplopedia.state.gov/index.php?title=Vatican\\_Policy\\_Documents](http://diplopedia.state.gov/index.php?title=Vatican_Policy_Documents)

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Comment  
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¶13. The Holy See is already using its "moral megaphone" internationally to support efforts to tackle climate change and environmental degradation, and to support vulnerable populations. It is open to approaches from the USG to engage on future efforts to reduce the negative human imprint on the environment. Recently, for example, visiting Speaker Pelosi thanked the Pope for his leadership on climate change and Congressman Faleomavaega expressed appreciation to Church leaders for the moral support offered to vulnerable maritime populations affected by climate change. Embassy Vatican is broadening engagement with Holy See officials on these issues. The Embassy would welcome contributions on our Diplopedia page from other embassies about the Church's environmental work in their host nations.

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